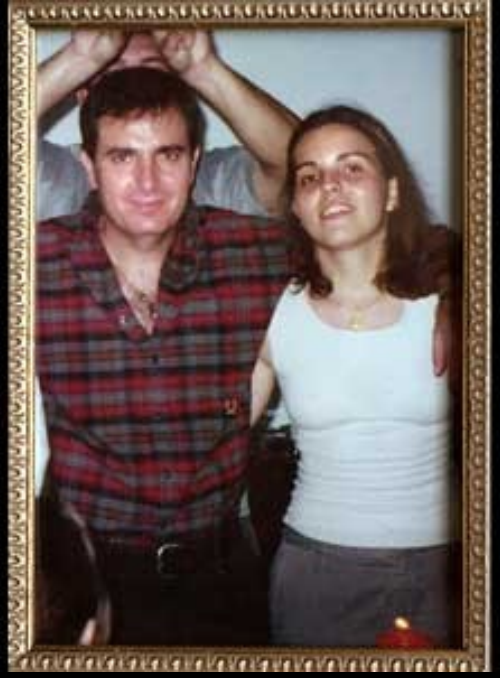
NOT EVERYONE THAT GETS HIT BY A DRUNK DRIVER DIES

The Jacqueline Saburido



Jacqui called her dad from Austin. She wanted to go to a birthday party that Saturday night outside the city on Lake Travis. The birthday boy, who was Venezuelan, would pick her up.

Her father didn't like the idea and told her to take cab fare with her in case she got stranded.

Jacqui had been in Austin for almost a month, studying English at a private language school near the University

Early on Sunday morning, September 19, 1999, Jacqueline, 20, and four friends were on their way home from a birthday party. Reggie Stephey, an 18-year-old star football player, was on his way home from drinking beer with some buddies. On a dark road on the outskirts of Austin, Texas, Reggie’s SUV veered into the Oldsmobile carrying Jacqui and the others. Two passengers in the car were killed at the scene and two were rescued. Within minutes, the car caught fire. Jacqui was pinned in the front seat on the passenger side. She

The front of Natalia's Oldsmobile was twisted and crumpled like an accordion. Broken glass covered the road. In the front seat, Jacqui struggled to free herself. She was pinned between the dashboard and the seat. Flames from the engine were starting to creep toward her face.

Next to her, Natalia was dead, crushed against the steering wheel. In back, on the floorboard behind the driver's seat, Laura lay curled in a ball, also dead. The two other back-seat passengers, Venezuelans Johanna and Johan, were dazed and injured. The flames edged closer to Jacqui's face. She pushed back, thrashing with her broken right arm for leverage. Jacqui rotated her face away from the flames. She couldn't twist far enough. Jacqui flailed. Flames wrapped around her. Her nose and her ears were on fire. Clumps of burning hair fell away. She started to wail. The paramedics had never heard anything like it. It was so many sounds at once — suffering and despair, terror and hopelessness. Absolute agony, one paramedic thought. Then he started screaming, too. "Oh my God, she's burning!“ Jacqui's wails seemed to go on forever. Jacqui's wails stopped. She slumped over in the flames, her head drooping on her right arm.

Firefighters pried the door open with the Jaws of Life, a hydraulic claw that works like a reverse set of pliers. The men wrapped gauze bandages on Jacqui's burns and tried to lift her, but she stuck to the seat. Gently, they peeled her off. A firefighter held her hand, where the skin hung loose, sliding off.

Jacqui, they (firefighters) agreed, burned intensely for about 45 seconds.

Rescue crews had to use the Jaws of Life to rip apart the Oldsmobile driven by Natalia Chpytchak Bennett, who was killed. Jacqui was in the passenger seat. Laura Guerrero, who also died, was in the back with Johanna Gil and Johan Daal, who were injured.

By December 1999, three months after the accident, Jacqui was still drugged and blind and had only a loose grasp on reality. She had little control of her body, either. Her muscles had atrophied after months of disuse. She needed constant support, from her father Amadeo and others, and often was despondent. 'One week, she cried every day,' Amadeo said. Jacqui celebrated her 21st birthday in the Galveston burn unit that

Month after painstaking month, Jacqui works toward becoming more independent. Early on, one of the things Jacqui could do without help was to clean her face with a cleansing cloth. She's hoping to get back more of her sight. Before the operation this year that covered her left eye with a flap of skin, she saw only shadows with it; her right

Scars run down her body, halting at her knees and before her size 7 1/2 feet, which the fire never touched. She has learned to use her feet like hands — her toes stroke a blanket's softness and test shower water.

Her fingers are amputated between the knuckle and the first joint. On her right hand, they are fused together like a mitten.

Nerve damage has left parts of her body numb. She can make out some texture with the bottom of her right palm. Her left hand feels only pinpricks — "like a thousand needles," she says. Her hands hurt every day, but Jacqui doesn't take painkillers.

Some kids shout. Some ask their mothers what happened. Some follow. Some hide.Once in a supermarket, a boy came near. “MONSTER”, he said. It's even worse when children cry. "I feel like a normal person inside," Jacqueline says. Questions haunt her:

Will I ever be independent? Will I ever be normal? Why me? Each day, she can stay in bed, or she can keep going. "You choose," she says. And every day, her father, Amadeo, is there, soothing, pushing, encouraging. "He's an angel with me," she says. Together, they face the questions and the stares. She understands why people look. They're curious. She's curious, too. She

In June 2001 Reggie Stephey was convicted of two counts of intoxication manslaughter for the deaths of Jacqui's two friends. He was sentenced to seven years in prison and fined $20,000. Convicted on his 20th birthday of intoxication manslaughter in the deaths of Laura Guerrero and Natalia Chpytchak Bennett, he will be eligible for parole in 2005. He and Jacqui appeared in an Austin police anti-drunken-driving video. The damage he did, he says, is 'a pain that will

No one thought she could survive. But Jacqui lived. Her hands were so badly burned that she no longer can use them. She lost her hair, her ears, her nose, her left eyelid and much of her vision. She has had more than 40 operations since the crash and has many more to go.

Drunken drivers don't just hurt the people they hit, she says. They bring suffering on everyone that person knows.

"Look at me," she challenges viewers, "and then ask yourself: 'Is it good to drink?' "

I loved my old life, Jacqui says at one point. I felt capable of doing anything.

Now, she says, "my soul feels trapped . . . like my soul is strong and wants to get out."

But this is my life, she says, and I try to enjoy it.....

Not everyone who gets hit by a drunk driver dies.
Jacqueline Saburido was 20 years old when the car she was riding in was hit by a drunk driver. Today, at 23, she is still working to put her life back together.
Learn more at www.TexasDWI.org
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Presentation by, SSgt Trumbo 62 Services VCO